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Cuffs

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After the initial “I don’t know if I can go in there” moment, I walked into room 3534 of the Memorial Union to find out what Cuffs was all about. If you are like most students who assumed it was a forum to discuss unfathomable fetishes,

think again.

Cuffs, which is arguably Iowa State University’s most controversial club, isn’t as

sexually wild

as most people think it is. Though most people envision meetings full of leather and chains — which there are plenty of — the main focus of the club is to educate members about how to safely use these toys and meet partners so no one gets seriously hurt or endangered.

Story by Zach Johnson
Photos by Nick Farris
Design by Joel Seiberling



“I’ve had people think Cuffs is one giant orgy, and I always think that’s funny because most of our members are in long-term, committed relationships,” said president Bill Spencer, a senior in psychology. “Sometimes people show up looking for a date but they leave once they realize that’s not what we’re about.”

Though the club is relatively small, with about 10 to 12 regulars and two to four curious people at each meeting, it’s gained quite a bit of notoriety on campus. In fact, on December 19, 2003, Cuffs was placed on interim suspension after a newspaper article highlighting a typical meeting caught the attention of Bethany Schuttinga, former director of judicial affairs. An investigation was called, and Cuffs was formally charged with violating Disciplinary Regulation 4.2.3, Assault, Injury, or Threat on February 16, 2004, which also ended the suspension. After a hearing on March 1, 2004, Cuffs was notified a week later that it had been found guilty of Assault and Violations of State Law.

Though matters have since been resolved, Cuffs has continued to be a much talked about but very misunderstood group. “Going into something like this, you have to realize that it isn’t widely accepted. You have to realize that it’s something else’s opinion and it doesn’t reflect poorly on you,” said Christina Timmerman, Cuff’s treasurer. Timmerman, a junior in microbiology, stresses that the purpose of Cuffs isn’t just to meet other people to play with. Instead, they focus on the issues that come along with living a BDSM lifestyle.

“Our big thing is teaching safety — how to do different things safely without causing unintentional harm, because in BDSM, yeah, it can be dangerous,” she said.

“We always say, ‘We’re here to keep freshmen from doing something stupid,’ and that’s exactly what we’re doing,” Spencer said.

One of the things Cuffs tries to do outside of its weekly meetings is to speak to human sexuality classes about the BDSM community and answer questions that, under most circumstances, people would feel uncomfortable asking.

“In the human sexuality class, the teacher kind of briefs them beforehand on who we are, what we do, and sometimes when we speak to a class we’ll get a lot of ‘I don’t understand. How can you do this? That’s wrong.’ And other times we’ll get great questions from people who are maybe interested but not comfortable going to a group meeting or didn’t know we were here, but it’s another opportunity to go and teach people what we know,” Timmerman said.

“We teach these 101-type subjects, and people might have had ideas since they first started thinking about sex, but they don’t know how to do them safely,” Spencer said.

Another misconception about Cuffs and people involved in the BDSM community is that they are sexually promiscuous. In fact, a lot of play doesn’t even include sex at all.

“Some [people] will be in serious relationships and only play with each other. Some will be in serious relationships and have permission to play with others. Play does not always involve sex — that’s something that can be negotiated. You can be in a serious relationship with someone and have sex with that person and then go play with somebody else who you don’t have sex with. It just depends on the relationship and the people involved,” Timmerman said. “But there’s a different kind of love there between people that play. You’re doing things that are kind of dangerous, and it’s very intimate — there is going to be a bond there between who you play with.”

There are certain guidelines to be followed when people engage in BDSM play. First, if the people are switches (both dominant and submissive), they need to establish

who will be what. Second, there needs to be a code word or a nonverbal signal if someone isn’t comfortable with something or is in too much pain. It’s important for players to communicate what their limits are and what they like before playing. By the end, the dominant takes care of the submissive, who has been through a very intense physical and mental experience, in what is called aftercare.

“If you play with pain, you get an endorphin rush, which is kind of this spacey, floaty feeling. Coming down off of those highs you can get cold really fast. Sometimes you can get sub-drop, which is after you’re body and your brain have had those endorphins and you can go into a kind of depression for a while,” Timmerman said. “There are different kinds of headspaces that a submissive can be in. A lot of BDSM is role-play, and if you’re the submissive and all your power is taken away, you get into this headspace where maybe you think you’re worthless, or maybe you’re verbally humiliated — you like that, but inside you feel like you’re nothing. Coming down off of those things, aftercare is good to get them back into reality, to let them know that they’re a person, you love them, that they’re not really those things.”

Slowly but surely, Cuffs is becoming less taboo on campus. Since Cuffs was founded in 2000, it’s endured suspensions, been the subject of controversy and even opened a few eyes on campus.

“We usually leave our door open so people can see what we’re doing and listen in, and we’ve had some professors that walk in and are just fascinated by it,” Spencer said. “At our rope bondage demo, judicial affairs came to make sure that we weren’t injuring anyone, and by the end of the meeting we had them tying ropes around their hands. It was the only real way to show them that what we do at Cuffs isn’t meant to do anything more than educate.”



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